

## Conference Reflection

### **Addressing the Unconscious Bias Gap - A reflection on reactions to a case study on Unconscious Bias presented at the APT conference 2016**

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#### **What?**

This article is a reflection on the discussion that followed the presentation of an online resource on Unconscious Bias in Learning, Teaching and Assessment at the APT Conference 2016 at the University of Greenwich. It follows Rolfe's et al (2001) reflective model of asking and responding to the questions of what?; so what?; and what next?.

Our institution's commitment and statutory requirements to equality and diversity are based on the Common Good with the mission of 'mak[ing] a positive difference to the communities we serve and this is at the heart of all we do, especially in our social innovation, teaching and research' and the vision of 'delivering social benefit and impact through education, research and social innovation' (GCU, 2016). To support the institution's mission and vision, a small cross-institutional team developed a range of resources to support and foster awareness and understanding of unconscious bias. The Equality Challenge Unit (2013) define unconscious bias as "a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control . . . influenced by our background, cultural environments and personal experiences." These resources are being delivered through a blended learning approach and informal accreditation via digital badges.

In late 2015 the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, raised the awareness of unconscious bias in relation to UK university admissions processes. From 2017 all admissions are expected to be anonymous. However, there are very few journal articles examining the potential influence of unconscious bias on learning and teaching approaches, resources and delivery methods. The conference presentation illustrated how the authors are attempting to address this gap by developing sustainable, openly licensed, online support materials to raise awareness of unconscious bias (on Blendspace and Sutori). Our approach is to encourage learner self-regulation through active reflection on personal attitudes and behaviours. The materials, which were demonstrated at the conference, are accessible to all staff via our virtual learning environment (VLE) and are integrated more widely into a range of learning and teaching related continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities.

#### **So what?**

Shortly before the conference, contributions to the SEDA JISC mail list identified a gap on unconscious bias, asking for resources and additional information. However, we found that most of the resources and information on unconscious bias centred around guidance developed for managers and not for learning, teaching and assessment. The demonstration of the resource was very well received and there was an expression of interest as to how this could be used by other institutions. The audience was reassured that the online resource was available under an open licence and not just for our own institutional use.

However, the main discussion revolved around the term 'unconscious' bias and how this has been adopted by the media and politics. In summary, contributions by the discussants

expressed the view that the term has been hijacked to express the intention of addressing unconscious bias, for example in recruitment and university admissions. There was an emerging agreement by the participants that these intentions are not addressing the real issues of bias in relation to discrimination and race, for instance. This could be seen to be reflective of neoliberal attitudes that makes people feel better about themselves without actually changing practice, stating that 'we do all we can, but we all are victims of our own 'unconscious' bias which cannot be helped. Potentially, one may state that now we have a name for it we can put processes in place, follow checklists and tick boxes, and thus, avoid delving deeper into the actual impact that unconscious bias has on decision making and establishing relationships. Overall, the discussion confirmed the original proposition of the authors that there is a significant gap in the literature on unconscious bias in learning, teaching and assessment.

While name-blind admissions may be a step forward, how far reaching is it? Unconscious bias will still need to be addressed throughout the rest of the student journey, i.e. in student support, the (virtual) classroom, assessment and feedback. The online resource represents a first attempt to raise awareness of how unconscious bias affects our interactions with students and encourages practitioners to be more mindful and reflective about their biases. This is particularly important given that students now pay a significant amount of money to be able to study at university and in the process are expected to become more discerning on the way they are supported, taught and assessed. The development of a Teaching Excellence Framework is an indicator of this trend and signifies the importance of the student experience in relation to tuition fees.

In contrast to the rest of the UK, Scotland faces a different challenge with regards to unconscious bias and name-blind admissions. While Scottish students do not have to pay tuition fees for studying in Scotland, the Scottish Government is driving forward contextual admissions (Scottish Government, 2016B). This partly serves to align the admissions process with the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence that includes transferable skills in addition to formal qualifications. It also aims to address the barrier to widening access in line with the Scottish Government's aim to 'create a fairer Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2016A). Contextual admissions contradict name-blind admissions since they focus on a holistic process taking into account all aspects of the prospective students. Here it is even more important to address unconscious bias and make sure admissions staff are well trained to be aware of the potential impact that unconscious bias has on decision making.

Despite the public drive to address unconscious bias in recruitment and university admissions, there is a need for further research and development on unconscious bias in relation to learning, teaching and assessment in order to identify strategies to mitigate the impact of unconscious bias within all aspects of higher education.

### **What next?**

Are we off the hook by applying different processes and procedures? Regardless of how many processes we put in place, we will still have biases. They are innate and based on the way our brain evolves during our lifetime (Ariely, 2009; Kahneman, 2011). Alongside the processes/procedures we need to constantly remind ourselves that we as human beings are biased and that this will influence our decision making. As such, the new processes/procedures that aim to address our biases can be viewed as a scaffolding to

support our decision making. They do not represent a solution, since there is no 'solution' as such.

As a result of the reaction to our presentation at the conference, we propose an open discussion and recognition of our biases and how they affect our decision making. A first step could be to challenge the term 'unconscious' bias and apply the term 'cognitive' bias to all our discussions and strategies to address the issue, adopting the term used by the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, 2011). We believe this has the potential to encourage a more open and honest discussion, accepting the responsibility for our biases and accepting the need to train ourselves in order to recognise and mitigate the effect of cognitive biases on our decision making. It also allows us as practitioners to delve deeper into the uncomfortable truths of discrimination, race and ethnicity, physical ability and social class (Mahzarin & Greenwald, 2013).

Another step could be for HEIs to move beyond the procedures/processes and incorporate proactive CPD on cognitive biases for all staff that includes exercises that enable learning and understanding of the effect biases have on our day-to-day working life for both students and staff. It could also be built into the curriculum for all students to enable an understanding and a proactive assessment of how cognitive biases impact on decision making and thereby also encourage an acceptance and understanding of the Equality Act and its significance for society as a whole. Higher education should always be about challenging biases and assumptions, this is the basis on which all research and scientific progress is built. The increased awareness of cognitive biases offer an opportunity to redefine how we as educators tackle discrimination and embrace diversity in its truest sense.

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